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ABSTRACT

An introductory paper for a British conference addresses some of the problems that arise when literacy education is brought from national and international centers to groups of people whose primary identity is with local languages and literacies. Some questions are raised regarding the reality of international cooperation in literacy, the possible damage to local cultures, and how international cooperation can be promoted in a way that sustains local identity. The notion of multiple literacies is discussed. Three ways to consider "local literacies" are suggested: different languages and writing systems; invented local literacies, often based on or connected with a dominant writing system but signalling for its users a different social identity; and vernacular literacies, or alternative uses of reading and writing within the same language and writing in a culture that is neither elite nor institutional. It is concluded that the issue of local literacies in not a marginal matter but that it is central to any language and literacy program. Contains 33 references. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (LB)

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What Do We Mean By "Local Literacies"?

Dr. Brian V. Street (University of Sussex)

Introductory paper for Conference on "Sustaining Local Literacies: People, Language and Power", Reading University 19-20 March 1993

Aims of the Conference

This conference addresses some of the problems that arise when literacy education is brought from national and international centres to groups of people whose primary identity is with local languages and literacies Whilst language and literacy are frequently closely connected with local or regional identity , international co-operation in many areas, especially education, is encouraging the spread of a limited number of major international languages and literacies (for example, Arabic, English, Fench and Spanish), sometimes at the expense of these local languages and literacies. . There is often, then, a tension between these two dimensions of literacy practice - the local and the national /international. Agencies and academics have only recently begun to pay the problem serious attention This conference aims to put these issues on the agenda and to raise some of the key questions such as "What is the reality of international co-operation in literacy?"; Is internationalism damaging to local cultures? How can the local be protected and enhanced by approaches of national and international Agencies to literacy? How can international co-operation be promoted in such a way as to sustain local identity?

This is not to ask for the preservation of tradition for its own sake or to resist change in order to fossilise local language and literacy as though in a zoo,. Rather, we take the view that local languages and literacies have a positive and constructive contribution to make to world development and change, whilst the uniformity assumed by mindless pursuit of a single language and a single literacy is damaging and impoverishing for all of us. There are also strong practical reasons for considering these issues at this time: many literacy campaigns have great trouble recruiting those with literacy problems and even when they are persuaded to attend, drop out rates are frequently very high. One reason for this failure despite the resources and effort put into literacy work is that people do not see the relevance of the programme for their own lives, and this is especially so when the literacy being brought is in an alien language or represents a different literacy tradition than that they have learned and used locally.

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NoticingLocal Literacies

This latter point raises an important issue that this conference needs to consider - how far do national and international literacy campaigns fail even to notice that the people to whom they are bringing literacy do already practice some form of reading and writing? Whilst doing anthropological field work in Iran during the 1970's I was struck how often the villagers I was living with were referred to by teachers and developers from the cities as "illiterate" even though many of them had, in fact, learned to read and write through 'Qoranic classes. Moreover, some villagers were adapting their 'Qoranic literacy to the needs of commercial literacy, filling in forms, keeping lists of products, writing cheques etc., yet even these supposedly more 'modern' uses of literacy were not recognised by the Agencies. The bringers of the 'new' literacy were so intent on making the "illiterate" literate, on bringing "light into dark", on stimulating skills and cognitive processes they assumed were absent. that they were unable to see what was already there; the rich literacy practices in which people engaged without the help of outside agencies and city-oriented teachers. No wonder so few people came forward to the programmes being offered, that denigrated local knowledge and learning and treated people with local literacy as though they were backward and ignorant.

In recent years there has developed greater sensitivity to local kinds of knowledge and understanding and some programme developers have begun to try to build on what people already have rather than assuming they start as empty vessels. Freireian approaches have made an important contribution to this, although even they are frequently guilty of assuming that without the kind of literacy their programme is bringing, peasants and others are incapable of thinking critically for themselves (Rogers, 1990) Practitioners and researchers, including many attending this conference, (Rogers, 1991; Barton and Ivanic, 1991; Hornberger, 1987;; Street, 1993; Limage, 1993; Berlanger, 1993; Nwenmely, 1990; Edwards, 1990; Jules, 1990). have begun to take a less ethnocentric and less top-down approach and it is from this new perspective that we hope to move on and begin to address some of the hard policy and practical issues this entails.

Multiple Literacies

I would like, firstly, however, to lay out some of the principles involved in beginning to address "local literacies" in this way. The first point to make, from a theoretical and a practical point of view, is that we can no longer talk about Literacy as though it were a single thing, - with a big 'L' and a single 'y' - as though "Literacy" meansthe same in all contexts and societies. Researchers as well as practitiopners now refer to "multiple literacies" and point

out that when a literacy campaign is being developed, we need to ask ourselves "which literacies" it is intended to bring to the recipients. We also, I would suggest, need to ask ourselves which literacies the recipients already have. The policy and practical questions will then hinge on what are the relative advantages and disadvantages of the different literacies for the aims of the programme. In other words we need to think about Literacy Policy in the same way that we have learned to think about Language Policy. A number of countries now have an explicit Language Policy - Nigeria, Botswana, India for instance, whilst others have not yet made it explicit but do implicitly favour one language over another - the UK for example. However, it is seldom recognised that the same attention needs to be paid to Literacy Policy - addressing the question of which literacy is being resourced,, for what reasons. Nancy Hornberger will be describing how such policy developed in Peru in South America, where Quechua language and literacy were being swamped by attention to Spanish language and literacy. Some Quechua speakers, aware of the importance of a literature to sustain the language of identity, have begun to write literary and other texts in Quechua so that it is now not possible for authorities to argue against learning Quechua on the grounds that there is not much written in it. Those who have worked in Africa and India will recognise similar patterns there. If one outcome of this conference is that countries in these regions become as sensitive to the need for Literacy Policy as they have become to Language Policy, then it will have been a worthwhile meeting.

What, then, are the ways in which we can talk realistically and for policy purposes about "local literacies"? I will suggest just three, although during the course of the conference I expect to see constant revisions of this starting position.

1) Different Languages and Writing Systems

The first sense in which we are coming to talk about "local literacies" is that suggested above in relation to Quechua and other languages of literacy, namely that a different language may also have associated with it a different writing system - a different orthography or way of representing the sounds or meanings of spoken language in written form. Arabic script, for instance, is used for a number of different languages - Farsi, Urdu - besides Arabic so that anyone switching amongst these languages has roughly the same script to deal with. However, someone switching from Farsi to English has to learn not only a different language but also a different writing system. The educational questions concern what is involved in such a switch, what does the learner have to learn in order to handle the new language and literacy and what are the difficulties involved? David Barton will be addressing some of these questions from a linguistic perspective during this conference. For

agencies and governments the question is also one of resources: what does it cost to teach people a new language and literacy, what are the reasons for doing for doing so and what are the costs of then using the new literacy in public domains? Debates about road signs and street names are particularly high on the agenda in situations where we are talking about different literacies as well as different languages. You can get about a city where although a different language than one's own predominates , nevertheless, the writing system is mainly the same. Where the writing system is also different, the visitor or speaker of a minority language does not even know where to begin. This is only one of the most striking and public aspects of what we mean by "multiple literacies" and of what is involved in developing a "Literacy Policy" in this context and I look forward to learning of further, more complex examples of how these issues affect people in different parts of the world.

2) Invented Local Literacies

The second sense in which researchers are coming to use the concept of "multiple literacies" is with reference to locally invented literacies, often based on or connected with a dominant writing system, but signalling for its users a different social identity. In Liberia, for instance, the Vai peoples developed a local script during the 19th century that has recently become celebrated in the research literature. Sylvia Scribner, Michael Cole and a team of researchers went to Liberia during the 1970's in order to test out the theories of literacy that predominated in western academic life (Scribner and Cole, 1980). They chose the Vai, as here was an example of people who made use of three languages and three literacies - Vai, English and Arabic. They wanted to test whether literacy in itself made any difference to people's cognitive skills, or whether it was in fact the education that accompanied literacy learning that made the difference. They gave tests of cognitive skill - memory, classification etc. - to people who were literate in Vai only; to those literate in Arabic, and Arabic and Vai; and to those literate in both these languages and literacies and also in English; and finally to those not literate in any of these writing systems. The differences between those who were non-literate and those literate in Vai were not very great - certainly not sufficient to justify the claims that there is a great divide between being literate and illiterate, that had dominated both academic research and Development work for decades before this. Likewise, the differences between those literate in Arabic, in English and in Vai were related to the different uses made of these literacies: as Scribner and Cole put it, "specific literacy practices promote specific skills". It was no longer enough to simply "give" people literacy and assume that cognitive and social consequences would follow: it all depended on the context in which

literacy was learnt, the particular literacy being acquired and the uses to which it was put in that situation.

Since then researchers have begun to pay more serious attention to other "*local literacies*" of this kind, invented often by indigenous peoples in the face of the dominant literacies of the colonial powers. In Nigeria, for instance, during the 1930's, aYoruba student educated in the Anglican mission, Josiah Oshitelu developed his own writing system in order to write down his visions and create a kind of Bible that would give his own Independent Church the same authority as the written word had given to the Anglicans. Based on arabic script, Oshitelu's Holy Script was written from right to left (see attached) and texts incorporated a 'key' to which,, unfortunately there appears now to be no clue. The existence of the script and the six massive journals containing Oshitelu's visions and messages, were crucial in the spread of his alternative religion (Probst, 1993). Similarly, some Native American writing systems, such as that invented by John Frum using a mixture of phonetic and ideographic principles, have been associated with resistance to colonial incursion and the spread of local religions. Florian Coulmas has documented the development of varied writing sytems both in early history and recently, showing how political and religious interests often lay behind their invention (Coulmas, 1990). His account demonstrates that we can no longer take an evolutionary view of the development of writing, assuming that it started with picture representations and has moved to more and more phonetic and abstract forms, as many early writers believed: instead, writing systems have developed in a variety of directions, building on previous systems and adding new creative inventions that suited local needs, a process that continues today. We cannot, then, expect English, for instance, to "naturally" overtake all other forms of writing, particularly ideoographic forms like Chinese, as many historians and politicans used to believe and some policy makers perhaps still do. The history of the world's writing systems suggests that they are elaborate, creative and adaptable and that different systems serve different purposes. When mass literacy campaigns in one language and literacy are devised, they are often in fact in contest with alternative writing systems or may even generate alternatives such as that of Osheitelu and John Frumm, in opposition to the cultural dominance their acquisition often involves. How this process may be recognised and used to best advantage of all those involved is one of the major themes of this conference. We have first, though, to acknowledge the existence and value of these invented local literacies themselves, before we can begin to discuss policy regarding them.

3) Vernacular Literacies

Whilst recognition of alternative literacies may be becoming more possible as a result of the kind of research outlined above, it is obviously easier to do this when we are dealing with differences in language , script and writing system. Where the concept of "multiple literacies" has become more complex and even harder to handle for policy and educational purposes, is where it refers not to a different language or a different writing system, but to alternative uses of reading and writing within the same language and writing. This kind of literacy variation is often referred to as "vernacular literacy" (Camitta, 1993), or as "Community Literacy" (Barton and Ivanic, 1991). Camitta, for instance, has described the 'sub-rosa' writing of adolescents in and out of a High School at which she taught in Philadelphia. These young people would produce very little in written form for their teachers in school, but she discovered that they were in fact very active and intense users of writing in their own, alternative world to that of school. They wrote rap songs and edited them, cut out sections from newspapers, sent each other notes, wrote poetry and creative pieces, or just functional notes that could be passed under the desk in school time. These alternative uses of writing she calls "vernacular" because "it is closely associated with culture which is neither elite nor institutional, which is traditional and indigenous to the diverse cultural processes of communities as distinguished from the uniform, inflexible standards of institutions" (Camitta, 1993, p. 228-9). There is now a large literature on these kinds of literacies (Shuman, 1986; Maybin, 1993) and educationalists are coming to recognise that they have to take account of the vernacular literacy of their students when they come to teach "schooled literacy" (cf. Willinsky, 1990). The differences between home and school literacy are now a major theme in educational research and teaching in the US (Heath, 1983; ;Street and Street, 1991). , whilst in the UK a long-term research project on the literacy practices of people in the town of Lancaster in northern England has helped to introduce these ideas in this country too (Barton and Ivanic, 1991). Adult literacy practitioners in Industrialised countries have had experience of this form of literacy variation for a number of years (Mace, 1993; Barton and Hamilton, 1990), but it remains to be seen how far it has been taken into account in Literacy programmes in the South. It involves, in linguistic terms, attention to different registers, dialects, creoles and other variations (as Barton, Nwenmely and others will discuss later) as well as to different languages and adds a further level of complexity to a field that is already highly varied and complex. For instance, in policy terms the question of standardisation arises here as it does with regard to national and international languages. Where a local language variation, whether a regional dialect or a creole, is being taught is it also appropriate to use a script or writing system that reflects local pronunciation and vocabulary, an issue that was hotly debated in London during the 1980's by, amongst others, the Afro-Caribbean Project? Where there are a number of creoles that have many similar features, is it politically more

powerful to work at standardising them so that they can offer a viable alternative to the dominant literacy and language for more users of these varieties (cf. Nwenmely, 1990)? How do such strategies work in countries, such as the UK at present, where highly centralised language and literacy policy is being delivered through a National Curriculum that eschews and indeed denigrates local usage as "incorrect" - the deficit rather than difference model. How are these struggles in countries with a century of experience of state schooling related to those where the state has only recently taken responsibility for the nation's education and where scarce resources make it appear a luxury to talk not only of different languages but of different dialects and registers?

Literacy Policy

These are some of the issues that I hope we can help clarify - if not resolve - during the next few days. It is at least already apparent that the issue of "local literacies" is not a marginal matter to be left to few traditionalists interested in quaint local customs - it is evident from the research and practice cited above and from the vast range of experience brought by those attending this conference, that the issue of "Sustaining Local Literacies" is a central part of any Language and Literacy programme. This conference can perhaps make a significant contribution to putting this issue on the international agenda, so that in the next millenium understanding of the nature of Literacy Policy will be as crucial as Language policy has recently become. This, I believe, can only be to the advantage of all of us, whatever our literacy and language uses..

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